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ABSTRACT

This fastback document examines student absenteeism and offers advice on what schools can do to improve attendance. It looks at truancy, absenteeism, and tardiness and how, since the first days of compulsory education, educators have had to deal with these obstacles to education. Since the 1970s absenteeism has been identified by many educators as the most persistent problem that schools face. Absenteeism rates vary from suburban to urban districts, and the causes can be traced to several factors, such as the home environment. Schools try to curb absenteeism by various methods, but overall, school principals must play a key role in improving attendance, which includes developing an attendance philosophy for the school. But even the best attendance policy must be accompanied by an understanding of student motivation. Schools must look at whether alienation is playing a part in absences. Other factors, such as cultural values, socialization, social responsibility, academic rigor, and school climate, must also be considered when examining attendance patterns. To improve attendance, schools should develop a clear, fair attendance policy, should support the attendance policy by placing a premium on uninterrupted instructional time, and should review and renew the attendance policy regularly. (Contains 58 references.) (RJM)

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Attending to Attendance

John W. Dougherty

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Attending to Attendance

by
John W. Dougherty

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Introduction

In *Prisoners of Time* (May 1994) the members of the National Education Commission on Time and Learning write:

> Time is the missing element in our great national debate about learning and the need for higher standards for all students. Our schools and the people involved with them — students, teachers, administrators, parents, and staff — are prisoners of time, captives of the school clock and calendar.

School subjects are taught according to prescribed allotments of time: so many minutes for reading, so many for science, and the like. Educators, parents, pundits, and politicians may debate whether the allotments are too little or not enough. However, such debates do not concern themselves with three time-related factors over which schools do have a measure of direct influence. These concern students: 1) being present, 2) being on time, and 3) being on task. When educators at the local school level attend to matters of attendance, these are the factors on which they need to focus. I use *attendance* in two senses: being physically present *and* attending mentally to a task at hand.

Many students fail to take advantage of the full measure of learning time allotted to them because they are absent without good reason, come late and therefore miss instruction (and sometimes disrupt the instruction of others), or use allotted study time for other, non-learning purposes.

Poston, Stone, and Muther (1992, p. 32) note that of all the findings from education research on how to increase pupil achievement, the most powerful concern time. Time is transient. Once a moment has passed, it is forever lost. Students and teachers cannot reclaim minutes lost to absence, lateness, and distraction. Therefore it is not surprising that the best teachers and the most successful students are those who make the most of the time they have. This fastback looks at problems of attendance and what educators can do to address them.

Truancy, Absenteeism, and Tardiness: A Brief History

Since the first days of compulsory education, educators have had to deal with absenteeism and truancy problems. As early as 1872, dropouts were causing concern for school officials. In 1884 only one-third of the students required to attend public schools actually did. In the 1930s more than two-thirds of the student absences were "nonillness-related" (Rohrman 1993). In the mid-1970s full-day truancy and cutting class became prevalent (DuFour 1983). Rodgers (1980) notes that in the late 1970s on an average day, 8% of students enrolled in the nation's schools were absent. Absenteeism has continued to concern the public schools through the 1980s and 1990s.

Consequently, since the 1970s absenteeism has been marked by many educators as the most persistent problem that schools face (Rood 1989). An important aspect of students' access to education is the amount of time spent in the classroom. When students are absent from school, cut class, or arrive late, they miss opportunities

to learn. Missed time in school leads to poor grades and further absenteeism, often creating a vicious cycle (Phillipps 1995). When students distract their classmates by their absences or tardiness, then they also are interfering with other students' opportunities to learn. And habits of absence and tardiness can affect work performance when these youngsters become adults (National Center for Educational Statistics 1996).

The Scope of the Problems

The National Center for Educational Statistics (1996) found that in 1990-91, 8% of high school students in suburban schools were absent on a typical day, a rate consistent with the findings in the late 1970s. The rate was slightly higher for city schools at 12%. The center also conducted a survey in 1990-91 of teachers in urban and rural schools in the United States. Fifty-five percent of the teachers surveyed thought absenteeism was a serious problem and 49% also thought tardiness was a serious problem.

Birnam and Natriello (1978) note that in such large urban schools as San Francisco, 22% of all enrolled students in 1974 had accumulated 10 or more unexcused absences in a single year. Out of 67 comprehensive high schools in New York, none reported average daily attendance (ADA) rates of more than 84% in 1978. They also analyzed the problems that absenteeism presents for students, schools, and society. For the student, absenteeism can lead to deficiencies in acquired knowledge and credentials that are necessary for future oc-

cupational success. School administrators may be concerned about student absenteeism from the standpoint of finances, because many states use ADA in their funding formulas. And from a societal view, absenteeism leads to problems with delinquency and crime, which occur when large numbers of students, particularly teenagers, are not in school.

This last correlation was confirmed more recently in the *Manual to Combat Truancy* (1996), a guide that suggests a set of principles for designing strategies. Produced cooperatively by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, it discusses successful truancy prevention programs in schools across the United States. One of the articles in the manual also cited research that found a correlation between high truancy rates and high daytime burglary rates and vandalism.

In a 1989 article, Robert Rood, principal of St. Clair High School in Michigan, identifies several characteristics of nonattenders and their reasons for excessive absenteeism as follows:

> 1) *age* — absenteeism usually increases through high school, 2) *gender* — in the first three years of high school, girls will have higher absentee rates than boys, 3) *race* — minority students are more likely to be absent than whites, 4) *school success* — students with higher GPAs and/or I.Q.s have better attendance, 5) *program* — students in college preparatory programs are present more often than those in general, vocational, or business programs, 6) *family setting* — students from a one-parent family have poorer attendance than those from the more traditional family, and 7) *school involvement* — participants in a variety of

> co-curricular activities will generally be in attendance more often than will non participants. (1989, p. 22)

Rood also notes that across the United States on any given day, some 2.5 million students will be absent from school. In fact, on the average Monday, urban high schools typically see an absence rate of 30%; and it is not uncommon for many secondary students to miss from 20 to 90 days of school in an academic year.

In many schools, often for no apparent reason, attendance has fallen over the past several years. Ligon and Jackson (1990) report that attendance at Austin High School in Texas was at an all-time high of 93.5% in 1983-84, when the Texas legislature mandated a state standard of attendance. Following the passage of this legislation, Austin's ADA declined over the next five years to 91.4% by 1988-89.

Oak Park High School in Kansas City, Missouri, opened in 1965 and had an average daily attendance rate of 95%. Over the next 30 years, Oak Park's average daily attendance rate slowly declined to the low 90s (Kahler 1997).

Karns High School in Knoxville, Tennessee, shared similar attendance problems in the early 1990s. Karns' average daily attendance fluctuated, depending on the weather and the time of year, between 81.55% and 94.5%. Tardies to school accounted for much of the discipline referrals (McMahan 1997).

Principal Sharron W. Walker describes the attendance problem at Baboquivari High School in Sells, Arizona. In 1993 with the help of an attendance task force, she found a definite "non-random or roller coaster" pattern

to attendance, with a peak at the school year's start, followed by a decline, then a jump at the end of the first semester and the beginning of the second semester, followed by a gradual decline again. Further data analysis found Monday, Friday, and Tuesday (in descending order) to be the days when students were most likely to be absent (Walker 1995).

Causes of Absenteeism

Absenteeism often can be traced to several causes, including an unsupportive school environment, lack of community support, chaotic family life, personal deficits, weather and transportation, and poor health. Some chronically absent students believe that school is not rewarding for them, or they may have few, if any, "mainstream" friends at school. However, students often fail to realize that skipping school eliminates the opportunity to cultivate friendships. Likewise, teachers and administrators often fail to realize that how they treat students may be related to curbing absences. School may seem more rewarding to students if teachers give frequent praise, interact with the entire class so that no one feels left out, use open-ended questions to stimulate students to think on their own, help to ensure that all students succeed, and minimize reprimands and competition in the classroom (Rohrman 1993).

Home dynamics also play a key role in chronic student absenteeism. Too often the home life of truant students is characterized by overcrowded living conditions, frequent relocations, and weak parent-child

relationships (Rohrman 1993). In addition, there may be a lack of parental concern about or control over student actions. And parents may lack an effective understanding of school procedures (Rood 1989).

It has always been accepted that students will be absent because of personal illness, a death in the family, and family emergencies. It now is a common practice for students to miss school for general appointments, including tanning sessions and haircuts, good weather, vacation, and "senior skip day," or to avoid scheduled tests and assignments. Overuse of these types of excuses can cause the average daily attendance to drop, student achievement to decline, and teacher workload and frustration to increase (Kube and Ratigan 1992).

Another factor is the peer group. A student's peer group can be a powerful influence on the student's decision to stay home from school. In one study, "84 percent of all truants said their friends had skipped school and 71 percent said their friends are involved in delinquent activity" (Rohrman 1993, p. 199). Many students who are absent may be school-phobic, lacking in self-esteem and social skills, or neurotic (Rohrman 1993).

What Schools Have Done to Solve the Problems

In the late 1970s a year-long study was conducted by five high school principals to find out what was being done around the country to improve student attendance. The approaches schools were taking were divided into five categories: 1) rewards for good attendance, 2) pun-

ishment for excessive absences, 3) contacting the home about excessive absenteeism, 4) contact with other agencies, and 5) alternative programs (Rodgers 1980).

Christen and Brown (1982) suggest that one reason for truancy may be the inability of some students to cope with the academic program they are pursuing. They conducted a small study in which they gave a number of students an inventory to determine how the students assessed their study skills. In general, the students indicated they were lacking in several study skills and that this deficiency contributed to their urge to skip classes. Of 20 students, 13 completed 10 hours of study skills training. At the conclusion, each student was surveyed again. Eleven indicated that their study skills had been sharpened. Nine of those students subsequently reduced their attendance problems. The authors suggest that a nine-week study-skills program should be included in the seventh-grade curriculum and repeated in the tenth grade for reinforcement.

Many schools have used the third approach mentioned by Rodgers, who reported on the earlier study: punitive measures to increase student attendance. Suspending students for not coming to school has been a standard practice. But a common response from parents to suspending a student from school for not going to school in the first place is, "You're giving him what he wants. You're rewarding him. He's already missed one day of school and now you're giving him a vacation" (Stine 1989).

A variation on this theme is withholding credit for students who are too often absent. Carruthers and

Driver (1980) describe in detail a policy used at Ellison High School in Kileen, Texas. Credit toward graduation was withheld for any class in which a student had been excessively absent. School officials attributed the best average daily attendance in the district to this policy. Perlberg (1980) similarly argues that students who miss significant instructional time, unless that time is replaced by homebound instruction, should not be allowed to earn credit as if they were present. He addresses the question of illness by stating that students should have the opportunity in future semesters to make up what was missed.

Robert Byrne (1981) describes an attendance policy in which limits were set regarding student absences. Once those limits were exceeded, students were placed in a "non-credit" status that, if not rectified, could result in the student passing a class without receiving credit toward graduation. Byrne describes how the policy was implemented, the challenges and problems that were faced in the first year, and the revisions that were made for the following year. Student objections were both individual and collective. Parents who were once supportive of the plan suddenly questioned it when it applied to their children. Even the faculty became disillusioned with the clerical requirements of the policy. Despite these problems during the critical first year, the increase in average daily attendance was astounding.

Other schools have adopted similar policies, denying academic credit for classes that students miss excessively. However, many such policies have been invalidated by the courts. Often the courts have held that

school officials' rationales for withholding credits are deficient. Usually the problem is related to a failure to distinguish between excused absences or the lack of specific authority to issue penalties for nonattendance (Zirkel and Gluckman 1982).

Many schools have tried alternative approaches. For example, Richard Konet (1987), a principal, describes what happens in his school when a student is absent for an unauthorized reason. A committee was formed to improve the attendance of students who might be inclined to cut classes or be truant from school and to separate those students who wished to improve their attendance from those who did not care. One attribute of the program, to which Konet attributes much of his program's success, is requiring a student to explain his or her absence to two teachers and an administrator within 24 hours of the absence.

Parent involvement is another common strategy. But not surprisingly, parents sometimes are part of the attendance problem, for example, when they excuse illegitimate absences or do not understand or support the school's attendance policies. An effective attendance policy that clearly establishes and enforces high standards and expectations for all students is benefited by the collaboration of all stakeholders.

General Guidelines for Programs to Improve Attendance

School principals play a key role in improving student attendance. They first must recognize and promote the idea that improving attendance also improves student and teacher attitudes, student achievement, and teacher productivity and creates an environment more conducive to learning.

In order to minimize student absences, Kube and Ratigan (1993) suggest several basic things that the principal, teachers, students, and parents should believe and do:

- The principal must promote the idea that something important happens each day at school. It is imperative for the principal to have built a consensus among the entire staff about the need to stress the importance of regular attendance. Then he or she must follow through and ensure that attendance standards are defined, understood by everyone, and consistently enforced.

- Teachers must let students know that they are missed when they have been absent. They must ensure that important learning experiences occur each day in their classes. And they must value and reward good attendance.
- Students must accept personal responsibility for being in school and in class on time. They must be aware of the importance of regular attendance.
- Parents must be responsible for their child's daily attendance and promptly inform the school attendance office when the student is absent. Parents must guide their children to take advantage of the opportunities to learn that the school offers.

Even effective attendance policies can go stale over time. Reviving effectiveness can be as simple as developing a new attendance form, a new student pass, or a new check in/out procedure — all of which may call renewed attention to the importance of regular school attendance.

If minor modifications such as those above fail to improve attendance, it may be time to revamp the policy and procedures. According to Andrews (1986), the following indicators suggest that this time has come:

- Many unexcused absences.
- Students lose class credit for excused absences.
- Inconsistent enforcement of policy.
- No chance for students to learn from attendance mistakes.
- Abuse of policy — students know the loopholes.
- Outdated provisions in the attendance policy.

- Average daily attendance below 92%.
- Excessive parent permissiveness, excusing students without legitimate reason.
- A time-consuming or unwieldy appeal process.
- Teacher frustration and stress concerning the current policy.

Andrews also suggests several steps that principals should follow in developing a new attendance policy:

- Know what the problems are.
- Find out how other schools operate successfully.
- Ask for teacher, secretarial, and administrative input.
- Seek support from your superiors (superintendent, school board).
- Pay attention to due process.
- Follow up to see if the new policy has been successful.

Dan Miller (1986) offers 50 diverse things that teachers and administrators can do to improve attendance. Most of his steps deal with aspects of policy and its implementation, but others address more basic education philosophy that will support efforts at improved attendance.*

- Create an attendance philosophy for the school.

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*From Dan Miller, "Fifty Ways to Improve Attendance," *NASSP Bulletin* 70, no. 492 (1986): 74-79. Used by Permission. For more information concerning NASSP services and programs, call (703) 860-0200.

- Create a structured attendance policy for the school.
- Hold students accountable.
- Create a make-up policy.
- Get the word out.
- Schedule attendance assemblies.
- Contact truants personally.
- Involve truants in co-curricular activities.
- Call parents of truants.
- Mail letters from the principals.
- Schedule parent conferences.
- Consider alternative schedules.
- Draft attendance contracts.
- Involve truants in group counseling.
- Refer truants to the social worker.
- Counsel parents.
- Test chronic truants.
- Involve the truant officer.
- Visit the home.
- Implement police sweeps.
- Offer help.
- Involve local agencies.
- Notify juvenile authorities.
- Refer parents to court.
- Refer parents to the department of family and child services.
- Develop a public relations packet.
- Enlist the help of the local media.
- Provide incentives for good attendance.
- Conduct attendance competitions.
- Provide feedback to homerooms.

- Reward good attendance.
- Publicize good attendance.
- Display attendance posters.
- Praise parents.
- Recognize teachers.

Miller offers the next 15 suggestions specifically for teachers:

- Set an example.
- Maintain accurate records.
- Follow attendance procedures.
- Emphasize attendance.
- Reinforce good attendance.
- Phone parents.
- Maintain a friendly personality.
- Create a pleasant environment.
- Improve punctuality.
- Make class special.
- Conduct special lessons.
- Create a classroom reward system.
- Give impromptu quizzes.
- Design difficult make-up tests.
- Consider student capabilities.

In recent years incentive programs have become popular as a way of improving attendance. Phillips (1995) enticed the students at his school to have better attendance by offering a food coupon from a local fast-food restaurant. Each student who had perfect attendance for a quarter received a coupon. Students who had perfect attendance for the whole year received a coupon for a

complete meal. The average daily attendance rose dramatically after this program was instituted. During the following years, the incentives grew because of the cooperation of area businesses. Some of the added prizes included savings accounts, gift certificates, dinners for two, and an entertainment center worth more than $500. All students received the food coupons in the following years, but they also were eligible to win the other prizes. And not only did the incentive program work to improve student attendance, but other noticeable changes included an increased number of students making the honor roll, improved SAT scores, and a greater number of students eligible to be inducted into the National Honor Society.

White and White describe an incentive plan that the staff devised and implemented at Knappa High School, in which the incentive was the possibility of being exempt from semester exams. Exemptions were based on a combination of grades *and* good attendance. The plan rewarded not only students with excellent grades and good attendance but also average students with exemplary attendance. The authors explain that "the rationale for rewarding students with grades hovering in the barely passing zone was that we wanted to motivate and reward the average student — those who came to class every day and put effort into their work — as well as rewarding the well-above-average students" (1997, p. 113). For example, a student with four absences and a grade of 95% or higher could be exempt from semester exams in classes with that requirement. But the student with perfect attendance and a grade of 70% or

higher also was eligible for the exemptions. For each semester, freshmen and sophomores were limited to three exemptions, including two core classes and one elective.

Another approach has been to use counseling. Trueman (1996), a guidance counselor at Canton Middle School in Baltimore, describes a program in which he and two other staff members met weekly in the school's conference room to review cases of student truancy and tardiness and to develop appropriate interventions. Called Canton Attendance Court, this innovative answer to the attendance problem was developed by the school improvement team. While using this approach, average daily attendance rose from 79% to almost 90%.

Martha Hegner (1987), writing almost a decade earlier, describes another counseling-based approach that has been used successfully. Hegner, the community affairs coordinator for the Rochester, Pennsylvania, Area School District, created and implemented an absentee prevention program for grades 7 to 12. This program determined the needs of students with attendance problems and then worked with the students, the family, social service agencies, and alternative schools to resolve conflicts. Hegner believed (as have others since) that a number of external stressors often are the cause of poor attendance. Such stressors include chemical abuse; conflicts with parents, step-parents, or siblings; sexual promiscuity; and a lack of home supervision.

Another approach to improving attendance that has become popular is simply holding students accountable for time missed. This is not as (directly) punitive as

withholding credit, nor is it truly an alternative or counseling program. Rather, the emphasis is on developing personal responsibility, though punishment can become a consequence if the student fails to follow through on his or her attendance obligations. Dennis McMahan (1997) discusses such a plan that stressed communication, student responsibility, and the concept of "time for time." The policy placed the responsibility on the student to be in class or, if the absences exceeded an established number in a particular class, to make up the missed time on a minute-for-minute basis. By policy, three tardies counted as one absence. Student absences at Karns High School were not to exceed six absences per class. On the day of the fifth absence, the teacher sent a five-day absence notice to the office and to the student. Class absences beyond six were to be made up by attending a time-for-time session in order to receive credit for the class at the end of the term. As a result of this program, Karns' attendance increased to 97%.

The criteria used to design this "time for time" policy included:

- Be manageable from an administrative/staff perspective.
- Be explicit and easily understood.
- Conform to requirements of computerized record-keeping systems.
- Meet legal requirements.
- Be acceptable to system administrators.

The program did not distinguish among reasons for excessive absence. No absences were considered "ex-

cused." Creative ways to schedule doctors' appointments, field trips, and other activities soon developed as a result of the new policy.

Why Attendance Programs Don't Work for All Students: Problems and Suggestions

Of all the problems that confront educators, the most elusive is student motivation. And it takes motivation to maintain good attendance.

Any educator who has been in the profession for long has experienced a continuum of viewpoints regarding poor attendance. At one end of the continuum rests the "iceberg" concept, that poor attendance is the visible part of a larger complex of issues and problems. The idea is that student reluctance (or lack of motivation) to attend school ultimately is the fault of a school environment that impedes self-expression, openness, and inclusion. At the other end of the continuum is the belief that students must be responsible for all of their own actions, including attending school. In other words, they are responsible for being self-motivated. This idea often leads to a rigid reliance on rules that tend to be intolerant of individual whims — or needs. In fact, neither

extreme presents an entirely accurate view. Somewhere there is a middle ground that balances the school's responsibility with the student's.

Alienation

Lack of motivation to attend school often is tied to alienation. And student alienation from school, for a whole complex of reasons, is very real. Mackey (1977) defines such alienation as a feeling of separation and disconnectedness. Calabrese (1988) amplifies that definition by adding such descriptors as isolation, powerlessness, lack of meaning, and unwillingness to accept societal (school) norms. Most often alienation shows itself during adolescence, though younger children also may be affected. Adolescent alienation may be characterized in general by three dimensions: 1) personal incapacity, a feeling of incompetence in dealing with the social world; 2) guidelessness, a feeling that the rules of conduct have collapsed; and 3) cultural estrangement, a rejection of the predominant criteria for success (Mackey 1977).

Alienation often is evidenced by a student's poor attendance — cutting classes, tardiness — and a generally negative attitude toward the school, the teachers, and the students who are engaged in the school experience. Truants tend to see themselves as outcasts who are rejected at school and so, in turn, reject the school experience.

In many cases educators must accept, or at least share, blame for a student's feelings of alienation. Such feel-

ings may be a result of an uncaring faculty, for example. Or the structure of the school — its courses, schedules, curricula, disciplinary procedures, and so on — may rankle. Attendance policies undergirded by a philosophy of "control," rather than "educate," can push students away, rather than draw them into the school experience (Beck and Muria 1980).

In the same breath, however, schools must be masters of time. Attempting to meet the educational, emotional, and social needs of all students challenges principals, teachers, and other educators to pack each day with meaningful experiences. This challenge cannot be met without relying on a system of rules and procedures, often one that reinforces traditional middle-class values and attitudes. Thus some students become alienated from school because this middle-of-the-road approach fails to match their values, interests, and needs. Boredom, apathy, and rebellion are symptomatic of this mismatch, which too often is exacerbated by incompatibility of teaching and learning styles (Stevenson 1992).

Apathy also can be transmitted by the school. When some students see apathy in how students and teachers view attendance and the enforcement (or lack of enforcement) of a reasonable attendance policy, then they may begin to feel that the rules of conduct have collapsed. Educators must accept responsibility for reviving a positive attitude toward attendance. Such a revival can be accomplished, according to Breed (1971), by instituting an instructional program with three components: 1) an attempt to develop knowledge about social rules, 2) ori-

entations that involve the building of goals that the adolescent is committed to realize, and 3) opportunities for reality testing of the goals.

Cultural Values

Punctuality and faithful attendance are generally regarded as common values in American society. One marker for success in the world of work is punctuality and faithful attendance; employers have little use for workers who show up late or are frequently absent from work. But American society is culturally diverse, and not all cultures have a high regard for punctuality and consistent attendance. Thus these values must be communicated to young people. Such acculturation is effected in a number of ways by parents and educators. Some of those ways are subconscious, such as modeling good attendance and punctuality. However, the effective attendance policy also communicates these values in conscious ways. Such acculturation shows young people how to cross cultural boundaries in order to adopt values that lead to success (Achilles and Crump 1978).

Raising the acceptance of a value such as punctuality or faithful attendance requires a supportive, accepting environment. Negative teacher attitudes are unlikely to motivate students to want to achieve good attendance. Indeed, some students will adopt the teacher's negative attitudes as their own feelings about themselves.

The increasingly multicultural aspects of society have not been recognized by some teachers, who must real-

ize that acculturation often is a painful, slow process. As acculturation proceeds, teachers must accept and value those students who are culturally different while, at the same time, helping them to understand the values of punctuality and faithful attendance, whether at school or at work. When teachers fail to do this, students often are unable to make the necessary cross-cultural transitions (Bobbitt 1977).

Socialization

Alienation and feelings of social disintegration sometimes go hand in hand. One important point often gets lost in the education talk, which is that many students come to school motivated not by interest in learning but by a need for society. Stevenson (1992) puts it succinctly when he says that many students come to school because that is where the other young people are. With this social factor in mind, many educators realize that they can use peer socialization as a means of combating alienation.

The socialization process is not the domain of the school per se, but of society. Callahan and Long put it well:

> Socialization is the total process by which a nation reproduces itself through the conditioning of its young to merge with and extend society. It does not require financial support, trained personnel, or a particular institution to carry it on. Schooling takes place in an institution established to teach the young and is designed to accomplish pre-determined goals. (1983, p. 419)

Rohrman (1993) notes that truants often do not express feelings of isolation; instead, they claim to have as many friends at school as other students have. However, these friends are also likely to be outside the "mainstream." Thus the entire cohort evidences alienation from the school mainstream of engaged students. When these students skip school, they find other classmates who are doing the same thing and feeling the same feelings. These frequently absent students develop bonds of friendship as an alienated group, and so a vicious cycle ensues. The reward of friendship within the alienated group, absent the ability to make friends in the mainstream, comes only when the student is truant and among other truants.

Such students often are labeled "disaffected." Educators must combat disaffection not merely by creating more rigid rules, but by adopting a more proactive stance with regard to student self-esteem. When disaffected students realize that their teachers and principals care about them and see them as individuals with worth and dignity, their perceptions of themselves begin to change. With this change comes the beginning of feelings of self-worth, of "can do" instead of "can't do," and of identification with the school as a helping place instead of as the enemy (Bobbitt 1977). Re-engagement, when students feel a sense of belonging, engenders an eagerness to succeed in the mainstream. When alienation and disaffection are replaced by engagement and acceptance, students who previously were often absent or tardy begin to be regular attenders. Their

grades improve, they feel valued, and their self-esteem is thereby further strengthened. A positive cycle of success replaces the vicious cycle of failure.

Social Responsibility

Related to the concept of socialization is social responsibility. Schools must encourage prosocial behavior — that is, self-governance and personal responsibility — and discourage antisocial behavior, which is marked by an attitude of unconcern for others. Simply put, from preschool to high school, students should learn to help others and to acquire the positive attitude of social responsibility.

Pointing out how their actions affect others sensitizes students to the needs and feelings of others and tacitly communicates a message of trust and responsibility. Kohn (1991) suggests that once children understand how their behavior makes other people feel, they can and will choose to do something about it. They will become socially responsible. Therefore children should be helped to see themselves as individuals who are responsible and caring — not merely with regard to themselves, but in relation to others. Out of this knowledge will come a shift in self-concept. Behavior will cease to depend on external direction (the presence of someone to hand out threats or bribes) and will become internally directed in a positive manner.

Children should "come to believe that their prosocial behavior reflects values or dispositions in themselves" (Grusec and Dix 1986, p. 220). Developing social respon-

sibility through encouragement and example is the most effective strategy. Punishment does not teach anything about the way a child is to behave but only about what he or she is not supposed to do (Kohn 1991). In the same way, suspensions and detentions for tardies and truancy are rarely effective in the long term because they are ways to punish antisocial behavior, rather than to teach prosocial behavior.

Some strategies for teaching prosocial behavior include training students to work cooperatively and teaching students to resolve conflicts in positive, socially responsible ways. These can be employed without the use of extrinsic rewards, which often are as counterproductive as punishments. Sternberg (1990) suggests that when teachers (and parents) give extrinsic rewards for certain kinds of behavior, they tend to reduce children's interest in performing those behaviors for their own sake. Prosocial behavior, in order to be fixed, must be its own reward.

Academic Rigor

Attendance problems, notably truancy that leads to the student dropping out of school altogether, are related to academic problems as well as to personal and social issues. When students are unable to cope with the learning challenges they face, they can choose to avoid the classroom, rather than to persist in the face of failure. Social promotion — moving to a higher grade before mastering the prerequisite skills — can be a factor in increasing academic failure. But such promotion also

must be weighed against the potential consequences of negative self-esteem when holding back a student.

A second factor that often contributes to academic failure is inconsistent (or nonexistent) study skills teaching. Many students who experience academic failure have not been taught, or have not acquired on their own, essential study skills for school success. Thus a complement to an effective attendance policy can be a carefully developed program to teach study skills to students who exhibit patterns of tardiness and absence. I recommend, in addition to persistent practice of good study skills and habits throughout the grades, a nine-week reading/study-skills program for all seventh-grade students, repeated in a similar fashion for all tenth-grade students. Such a program should include basic instruction appropriate to the level of the students in taking notes, studying, managing time, preparing for tests, and reading for understanding.

Other instructional strategies also can help students acquire "school skills" while simultaneously fostering a more productive social climate, including cooperative learning, cross-age tutoring, peer counseling, and the like. Programs such as TESA (Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement) can help teachers, counselors, and administrators to better understand the dynamic relationship between a school's interpersonal environment and student achievement. Advisor-advisee programs, volunteer and community service initiatives, and school-to-work programs all merge community-building (within and outside the school) with academics (Tucker-Ladd 1990).

School Climate

During the 1980s many education writers were commenting on the effects of desegregation, pointing to the high minority dropout rate and the high incidence of absenteeism among minority students. Rumberger (1983) discussed the need for structural reform in schools to confront issues of minority alienation. Polk (1984) argued that many minority youth have been "segregated" in the sense of not being actively invited into involvement in meaningful school activities, and thus they have rebelled by rejecting such involvement. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argued that such rejection extends to majority values as a whole, including the value of regular school attendance.

"Minority" might be eliminated in this context, because, in truth, all at-risk students seem to sense that they are in the minority, that they are segregated by circumstance and then by choice from the mainstream. I thus return to the theme of alienation, but in this instance from a different viewpoint, which is to consider school climate in general.

Schools in a democratic society must exemplify democratic values, including valuing diversity and difference. All students must feel themselves to be part of the school community. In fact, if students are disaffected through a lack of parental care, concern, or supervision or because the community in which they live does not nourish their need for social and intellectual involvement, then they should find the school to be a haven. At school they should be recognized as individuals of

worth and dignity, individuals capable of success not only within the school society and academically, but also as they merge with the community and world of work beyond the schoolhouse door.

Unfortunately, life in school often is teacher-centered, textbook-dominated, restrictive, impersonal, and rigid (Goodlad 1984). Schools cast in this mode become endurance contests for all students. Those who are bright, who come from mainstream homes with a high value for traditional education, and who themselves "fit" the dominant cultural model can succeed in these contests. But other students may not. Many students lack the perseverance to stay the course. Thus, too often, they choose not to attend, not to engage as a contestant, to delay attendance by being tardy, or to act out in the hope of being sent out.

School reform that addresses the alienation of some students as a result of school climate looks at reviewing school policy (including attendance policy) with a view toward greater inclusion. Schools must allow full representation of opposing cultures and views because meaningful participation of all students (and, by extension, their families) is essential to reducing alienation (D'Amico 1980). Rohrman (1993) confirms that student attendance drops when a school's climate is marked by unnecessarily restrictive rules, high rates of teacher absenteeism and turnover, racial differences between students and teachers, and high rates of violence in the school.

Teacher alienation also must be recognized as a factor in student alienation. Some teachers, particularly in ur-

ban high schools, may feel as though they are trapped in positions they do not want but cannot afford to leave. They complain about burnout and convey to students, often unwittingly, that they regard school negatively. When teachers are disaffected and psychologically disengaged from their work, that attitude cannot help but spill over into the attitudes of students (Dworkin 1986).

School reform that addresses school climate must be concerned with such issues as they affect the total school community. Teacher disengagement feeds the alienation of students and is, in turn, fed by it. For teachers, alienation can be decreased by 1) creating more supportive working conditions, 2) increasing a sense of professional collegiality, and 3) providing opportunities for teachers (and administrators) to influence policies and practices that affect them.

Three Recommendations for Improving Attendance

Following are three recommendations to be gleaned from the foregoing discussion.

1. Develop a clear, fair attendance policy.

With input from administrators, teachers, students, parents, and others in the school community, an attendance policy can be developed that is easy to understand and positive rather than punitive. Poston and his colleagues (1992) offer some factors to consider:

- The policy should be up to date and standardized.
- The policy should clearly define what constitutes excused and unexcused absence and tardiness.
- A procedure should be specified for dealing with chronic absence or tardiness. Follow-up on truancy should be systematic and immediate.
- A reward-incentive system for good attendance, including recognition of exemplary attendance, should be specified.

- All provisions of the policy should be applied fairly and consistently.
- The policy should be clearly communicated to everyone concerned.

2. Support the attendance policy by placing a premium on uninterrupted instructional time.

Many researchers have observed that only about 60% of a school day is actually available for instruction (Poston et al. 1992). Interruptions and the dictates of unwieldy or rigid schedules are the bane of modern schools. Attendance can be highly valued only when instructional time — the main reason for good attendance — is valued and can be regarded as inviolate.

An effective attendance policy can be supported by:

- Scheduling an inviolate, academic, uninterrupted, learning block of time every day.
- Prohibiting solicitations and fundraising during school time.
- Scheduling nonacademic activities (school photos to pep rallies) during lunch or after school.
- Prohibiting (or at least limiting) class interruptions, such as announcements, pull-outs, and visitors.
- Reducing the number of assemblies, rehearsals, and the like, that interrupt instruction.
- Reducing the number of times students must change rooms, such as by instituting block scheduling.
- Controlling excessive sanctioned absences for such activities as field trips, sports events, and so on.

3. Review and renew the attendance policy regularly.

The longer an attendance policy remains in place, the more likely it is ineffective. Over time administrators, teachers, students, and parents become complacent about attendance. A "business as usual" mentality sets in. Parents and students find "loopholes" in the policy and exploit them.

Do not wait for a drastic drop in average daily attendance. Rather, set in place a system for regularly reviewing and fine-tuning the attendance policy and for bringing the importance of attendance to everyone's attention.

A Few Concluding Thoughts

Schools and schedules often are not designed with student attendance in mind. This can be a serious oversight that can contribute to excessive tardiness, in particular, and in extreme cases can be a contributing factor (such as by diminishing the quality of the school climate) in increasing student absences.

Reducing the number of times that a student must change classes is an opportunity to reduce tardies and decrease the chance of truancy. The block schedule does this without sacrificing instructional time. Instead of five, six, or even seven changes, the block schedule reduces changes to three or four a day.

The architecture of most secondary schools clusters classrooms by department. While this configuration may have advantages for teachers and architects, it holds little advantage for students, who often must navigate through an entire large building each day. If their classes are widely spread — almost inevitable at some point each day — then some students are bound to be tardy at least part of the time, particularly if passing

time is short. And passing time often is intentionally short in order to limit loitering by those students who do not have far to go between two given classes.

The locker system in many schools also produces problems. Lockers often are located all over the building, and students may be assigned a locker without regard to where their classrooms are located. Particularly in schools that prohibit students from carrying overstuffed bookbags from class to class, the necessity to visit one's locker fairly often can make it difficult to get to class on time — or at all, for at-risk students who may already be frustrated with school.

It behooves educators who are serious about improving attendance to take a close look at the logistical problems that may be inherent in the architectural and scheduling features of their schools.

On the whole, however, the key to improved attendance lies not with the school building but with the individuals in it. Educators need to rethink policies and practices that can inhibit good attendance and punctuality. Every school will present a slightly different set of circumstances with which educators, students, and parents must deal.

More than two decades ago Maynard (1977) offered seven succinct suggestions for combating poor attendance, much of which relates directly or indirectly to feelings of alienation, as I have pointed out throughout this fastback:

1. Build a positive school climate.
2. Implement strategies that enable students to succeed.

3. Teach students how to behave by modeling proper behavior.
4. Involve staff and students in all facets of the school.
5. Develop open and honest communications.
6. Build trust.
7. Model and teach positive interpersonal relations.

Of course, it will be recognized that these qualities characterize successful schools in general. But, then, successful schools do have good attendance.

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